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The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

A Way Forward to Manage the Crisis and Ensure the Right of Return

CONTEXT

Refugees comprise 25% of total residents in Lebanon; the highest percentage amongst all refugee-hosting countries.

This massive refugee influx into Lebanon, caused by the ongoing Syrian crisis, has triggered multiple and grave challenges. On the one hand, refugees are living in fragile, even inhumane conditions sometimes, while the Syrian authorities still refuse any form of return. On the other hand, their presence in Lebanon imposes an ever-growing economic burden, competition with the Lebanese in the labor market, additional pressure on the already dilapidated infrastructure and weak service sector, as well as a deteriorating security situation.

The status quo is a ticking time bomb that threatens social stability in light of the Lebanese state's withdrawal from its role in managing the crisis. An urgent national need therefore arises to address the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, while accounting for the challenges of return, but also, the unsustainability of the current situation.

IN NUMBERS

• According to official estimates by the Lebanese government, there are between 1.5 and 2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

• 33% of refugees receive cash assistance from the United Nations.

• Vulnerable Syrian households receive 2,500,000 LBP in aid from UNHCR, while the World Food Programme provides 1,100,000 LBP per household member, with an upper limit of 5 members per household.

• According to the Ministry of Public Health of 120,000 newborns in 2022; 68,000 were Lebanese and 50,000 Syrians. In other words, 40% of all newborns in Lebanon are Syrian.

• 52% of all Syrians in Lebanon are less than 20 years of age, compared to 29.6% only on the Lebanese side.

• Around 17% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in refugee camps.

A POLICY OF NO POLICY

• The Lebanese authorities have consistently adopted a policy of "no policy" towards the issue of Syrian refugees. In 2014, the authorities officially rejected the integration of refugees and the construction of camps, while falling short of offering tenable policy options. In 2020, the authorities emphasized the need for a safe return in a government decision that has so far remained ink on paper.

• The Lebanese state withdrew from its responsibility to manage this crisis, under the pretext of the threat of nationalization. In 2011, it stopped registering refugees and transferred this task to UNHCR, thereby foregoing the state-owned database on refugee demography and subsequently weakening its ability to understand and respond to the crisis. The State's failure to adopt a unified approach to the crisis has reduced its relationship with the international community to continued aid requests, void of a strategic vision. Characteristically, this aid was not used in a sustainable manner that would have benefited both Lebanese and Syrians.

• The State's approach to the refugee crisis was also impacted by internal political divisions around the Syrian regime. While coordination at the security and political levels remained ongoing between the two countries, and while the Lebanese state recognized in the 2020 'General Policy Paper for the Return of the Displaced' that "one of the most important pillars of the safe return of the displaced is cooperation with the Syrian state, the only party capable of securing the necessary guarantees", there remained others that rejected normalization with the Syrian regime. The Caesar Act and the risk of sanctions were an additional factor in rejecting these dealings.

OBSTACLES IMPEDING RETURN

FROM THE SYRIAN PERSPECTIVE:

• The Syrian regime rejects the return of (Sunni-majority) refugees for fear of compromising the field results it has achieved in areas of Sunni influence.

• The prevalent social conditions in Syria prevent the return of refugees, especially since most of the areas from which they fled were either completely destroyed, taken over by internally displaced persons, or their properties and lands were confiscated by the Syrian regime under its newly-introduced expropriation laws.

• In addition, many refugees continue to have grave concerns regarding persecution or threats by the regime, because the majority have evaded compulsory military service or because of their anti-regime positions.

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE:

• The international community insists on a political solution to the conflict in Syria as a condition for providing financial support to launch the rehabilitation and reconstruction process, which weakens the effectiveness of its interventions to resolve the crisis.

• In the face of this reality, the international community stands unable to provide any alternative policy options, restricting its approach to aid delivery to refugees and host communities, and thereby propagating an unsustainable status quo.

WAY FORWARD

• The Lebanese state should build an updated database, allowing it to better understand and distinguish between the different statuses of Syrians residing in Lebanon, and tailor responses, including return strategies, accordingly.

• Registration should be initiated at three levels: residency, marriages and births including for Syrians with no identity papers. This helps avoid a generation of 'stateless' Syrians, especially since registration rates of refugee births did not exceed 36% in 2022. Registrations can be completed in a period of 12-18 months if the necessary financial and human resources are secured.

• Labor market regulation is key to manage labor force dynamics and competition for jobs. This necessitates work permit issuance for Syrian workers in Lebanon, as well as the enforcement of all other labor laws and regulations.

• Illegal borders and crossings should be controlled; political, logistical and technical support should be provided to the security services to that end.

AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL - THE NEED TO REACH AN ARAB AND INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT THAT GUARANTEES THE RETURN OF REFUGEES:

Lebanon needs to capitalize on the newfound regional political dynamics including the reintegration of Syria to the Arab League to invest in diplomacy, and push for a roadmap for the return of refugees under the auspices of international and regional powers:

• Push for solutions that allow return to specific areas, in parallel with working on a comprehensive political solution. This should be coupled with commitments from donor countries to contribute to reconstruction efforts, starting with the rehabilitation of priority areas identified for the return of refugees.

• Urge the international community to shoulder its responsibility and share the burden of this crisis by raising resettlement rates and increasing aid for Lebanon and host communities in particular.

• Pressure the Syrian regime to provide serious commitments towards ensuring safe return, especially with regards to military service, arbitrary detention, and land expropriation.